



past for a positive future

E K JANAKI AMMAL *and* **THE WESTERN GHATS**

**CONCEIVING A PROJECT OF MODERNISATION,
DECOLONISATION AND CONSERVATION**

Savithri Preetha Nair

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ABSTRACT

The Western Ghats enjoyed a primary place in E. K. Janaki Ammal's life in science, both ontologically and epistemologically speaking. She argued in the 1950s, that the vegetative climax of India was the dense and tall tropical evergreen forests found in the Western Ghats (and in Assam) and included among the list of objectives of the Central Botanical Laboratory of the Botanical Survey of India, which she founded, ethnobotanical research—the study of the dynamic relationships between peoples, plants and environments, from the distant past to the immediate present. This objective would remain largely unaccomplished. It would however be resumed two decades later, at the tail-end of her life, with one of its chief aims being the production of a modern and anti-colonial Hortus Malabaricus, a compendium of medicinal plants of the Western Ghats reordered from the chromosomal point of view, and based on information collected in situ from forest dwellers, who she believed were the primary interlocutors of indigenous medical knowledge. Also, quite tellingly, as this paper argues, rather than expend energy fighting the Kerala government on the Silent Valley issue, she chose the path of least resistance, and creatively floated the idea of a pioneering project on the cytogenetics of the flora of these undisturbed forests, and of conservation.

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ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Savithri Preetha Nair received her doctorate in 2003, from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London for her dissertation on the museum and the shaping of the sciences in colonial India. Nair's research interests include history of science, modernity and enlightenment at the turn of the nineteenth century, history and politics of collecting for science, sociology of knowledge, the public museum, and women in science in colonial and post-colonial India. Among her books is the co-authored (with Richard Axelby) *Science and the Changing Environment in India: A Guide to Sources in the India Office Records 1780-1920* (British Library, London, 2010), the monograph, *Raja Serfoji II: Science, Medicine and Enlightenment in Tanjore, 1786-1832* (Routledge, 2012), and the most recent *Chromosome Woman, Nomad Scientist: E. K. Janaki Ammal, A Life* (Routledge, 2023), besides several papers in peer-reviewed international journals and edited volumes. Nair is an independent scholar, and divides her time between London and Kerala.

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